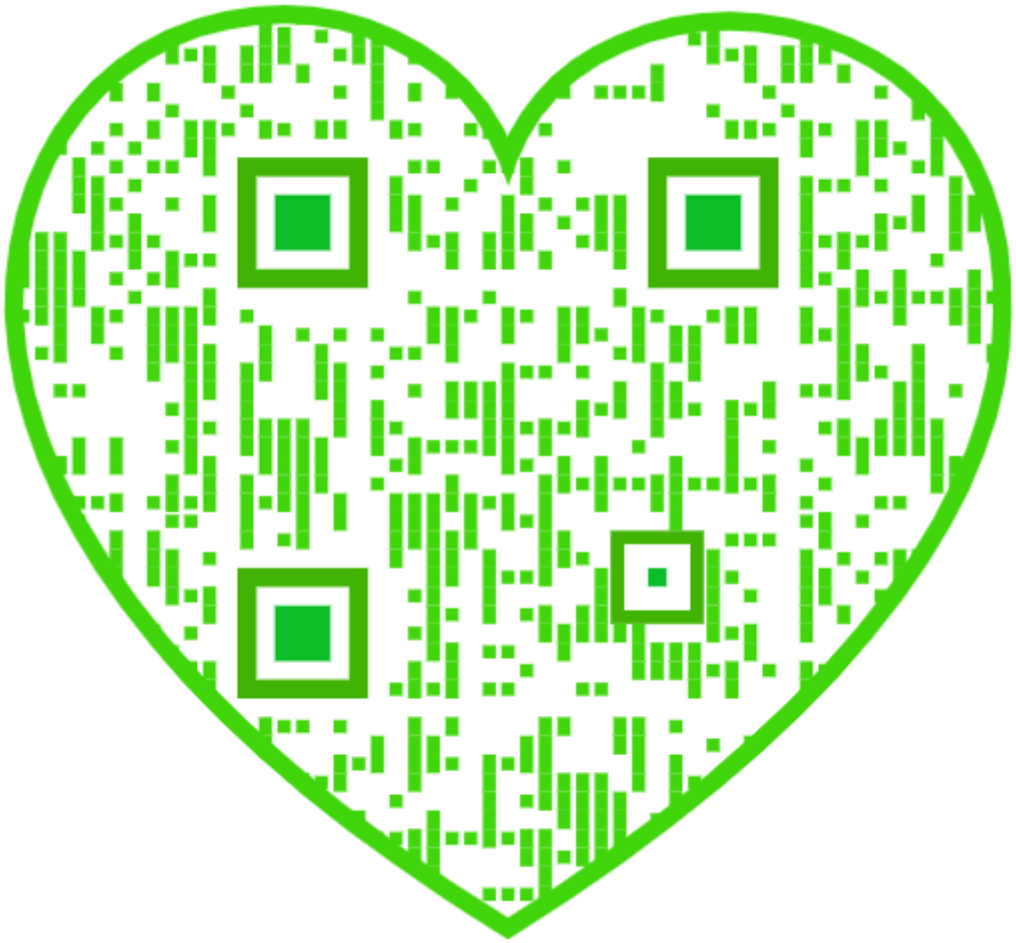
Survival Skills - How To Build a Debris Hut

By Paul Scheiter

There is a detrimental and recurring theme I have noticed in myself as well as some of my friends that study wilderness survival. I am referring to the tendency we have to rush through the learning of any particular skill and unintentionally rob ourselves of valuable learning opportunities. I noticed this error in myself when I was thinking about my experiences building primitive shelters. Almost every time I have slept in a debris hut, the weather conditions have been mild and extremely forgiving. Only once in the past have I stayed in a debris hut during the winter, and I recall it being an uncomfortable and sleepless night. The true mistake I made was not building a poor shelter, but rather that I didn't get back out there to fix it, and do the process over again until it was perfect. Essentially I quit at the very moment when the best learning was about to take place. Realizing this, I decided to recreate the learning experience and share the process with you. Below you will find pictures and descriptions of my most recent debris hut. My girlfriend and I built it over the course of a day and then slept in it the night of Christmas Eve… in my opinion it was a perfect way to wake up Christmas morning. This debris hut was far more comfortable than my last, but still left some improvements to be desired. I plan to fix it shortly and then share the next phase of my learning process with you again in another article next month. Enjoy!

Step 1: Shelter Location

Find an area with plenty of leaves and sticks that is also free from natural hazards like flooding and especially "widow maker" limbs or trees that could fall in a storm.



Step 2: Clear the Ground
Rake back the forest debris to clear a spot for your shelter. Later on you will be filling this area back in with leaves, but for now this will help vacate insects and other critters. It also helps to begin drying out the dirt of your shelter floor.

Step 3: Elevate the Ridge Pole

Create a small stack of logs, building them on top of each other like a pyramid. The ridge pole will end up resting on top of this stack. The purpose is to create room for your feet inside the shelter.

Step 4: Cover with Dirt
You can now cover the mound of sticks with dirt. This keeps them held together firmly, and will create a more weather-tight seal as the shelter begins to take shape.

Step 5: Lashing the A-Frame
You can now lash two poles together to form an A-Frame that will end up supporting the ridge pole of your debris hut. I used simple jute twine, although cordage is NOT necessary. Alternatively, you can create an A-Frame by propping a pole against a tree or using a Y shaped branch.

Step 6: Assemble the Ridge Pole
Now simply lay one end of the ridgepole on top of the A-Frame and set the other end on top of the elevation mound. This is the foundational framework for your shelter.

Step 7: Assemble the Ribbing
Here the shelter really begins to take shape. Lay a series of small crosspieces (about wrist thick), between the ground and the center ridgepole. Essentially you are creating a tent-like structure.

Step 8: Seal it Up
Now crawl in the shelter and pack the dirt in around the vertical crosspieces. This will help tremendously to block the wind that would normally creep in underneath your shelter.

Step 9: Add Debris... Lots of Debris
While this may seem like the finishing touches of the shelter, the actual work is just now

beginning. Ideally, the debris should be about two feet thick on every side of the shelter. As a good friend of mine said, "You can have enough debris, but never too much." Many people half-ass this step in shelter building and pay for it in the form of a cold and uncomfortable night. The bottom line: keep collecting debris until you think you have enough... then you know you are at the half way point.

Step 10: Build a Tunnel

As the shelter walls continue to grow, you will want to begin building the framework of the entrance to your shelter. A small tunnel is perfect, and will allow you to pull in debris behind you to seal up the opening. The tunnel should be at least three feet long: this will give you plenty of space to pack full of leaves as you bed in for the night.

Step 11: More Debris!
Keep collecting leaves until you can no longer walk and it hurts to bend over. Even in this picture, the shelter is not even close to having enough debris.

Step 12: Semi Finished
I continued adding leaves for about another hour after this picture was taken, and that was as

much work as I could finish that day. I started at 8:00am and stopped around 6:00pm. The result was that the shelter worked "good enough", but not surprisingly it needed more work.

My Critique
The cold temperature was a tremendous teacher: it would not allow me to ignore the short comings of my skills as I had been used to doing in the past. If you create a shelter similar to this one, I encourage you to pick a cold or rainy night to sleep in it. After all the shelter is intended to keep you safe from such weather, and in a survival situation you won't have the luxury of choosing favorable conditions.

One fatal mistake I made was getting out to take a leak in the middle of the night. Opening the shelter caused all the trapped heat to vacate. When I got back inside, it was like starting from scratch. Sarah and I had to warm all that space up again with body heat, and it took several hours for it to return to a comfortable level. In a more dire situation it would have been best to just let-r-rip inside the shelter... although if I had done that with Sarah in there, I guarantee I would NOT have survived the night!

Another critical oversight: there was way too much free space on the inside. The more free space there is, the more your body will have to heat it up. Next time I will pack the shelter with a lot more debris, especially on the ground.

The tunnel entrance to the debris hut also proved to be a point of weakness. After my call of nature I was tired, cold, and groggy. I rushed the process of sealing the entrance, and for the rest of the night one small opening became the source of a continuous cold draft.

All in all, the shelter did its job and kept us reasonably comfortable through freezing temperatures. I gained a tremendous appreciation for the amount of work it takes to properly construct a debris hut. Later this week I am sleeping in the hut again and will do my best to correct the mistakes I made the first time. I will look forward to sharing my progress with you next month!

Best always,
Paul

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